Four die as mini truck plunges into ravine in Mirpur

By Our Staff Correspondent

MUZAFFARABAD: Four persons were killed and six others injured when a mini truck carrying a young oxfor a bullock racing event plunged about 200 metres into a ravine in the southern Mirpur district of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) on Monday.

The accident occurred at around 10am when the brakes of the Shehzore pickup failed while it was ascending a steep stretch of road some four kilometres ahead of the Dhan Galli bridge, within the jurisdiction of the Dadyal police station, police official Waheed Khan told *Dawn* by telephone.

He said there were 10 persons, including the driver, aboard the vehicle, which was transporting the ox to participate in the Monday's racing competition in the Ban Sain area of Dadyal – an affluent AJK town, along the banks of Mangla Lake, known for hosting traditional horse races, tent pegging, bullock races and animal fairs.

Three of the occupants — driver Tahir Nadeem, son of Ahmad Deen, a resident of Gawara in Sudhnoti district; Rashid, son of Ahmad, and Asim, son of Manzoor, resident of Saagri and Banal, respectively, in Rawalpindi district — died on the spot, while seven others sustained injuries.

Mr Khan said two of the injured were shifted to Rawalpindi in critical condition, but one of them — Muhammad Junaid, son of Muhammad Fayaz, a resident of Rawat, Rawalpindi — succumbed to his injuriesen routeto a hospital.

The remaining five injured were being treated at the Tehsil Headquarters Hospital in Dadyal and were reported to be out of danger, he added.

The young ox sustained fractures to both its legs and was slaughtered shortly after being recovered from the rear cage of the mini truck.

Hassanabdal to be brought at par with developed towns: MNA

By Our Correspondent

TAXILA: PML-N leader and Member National Assembly Sheikh Aftab Ahmed announced that Hassanabdal would be brought at par with developed towns through a series of large-scale development projects, backed by funding worth millions of rupees to upgrade infrastructure and civic facilities across the tehsil.

He made these remarks while addressing a public gathering as chief guest at the inauguration of a Rs17.758 million road construction project in Jhuj village of Union Council Sultanpurk.

Sheikh Aftab said under the leadership of PML-N supremo Nawaz Sharif, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz, Pakistan and Punjab are once again moving forward on the path of sustainable development. He added that Hassanabdal, which had suffered years of neglect, was now witnessing visible change through focused investment in infrastructure.

Recalling earlier initiatives, the MNA said that several key development projects had already been launched and completed in Hassanabdal during the past one and a half years. These included the construction and rehabilitation of roads in Bhidiyan, Pir Mandrialah, Pord Miana, Islamkot, Jhuj, Berhan, Morhan Khattaran and KSP Malik Sadaqat Road, while work on Chhapar Road is halfway complete and tenders for Kalupind Road have already been issued.

He added that the Pind Mehri–Jahanabad Road would also be constructed in the next phase. He said that provision of Sui gas had been ensured in several villages, including Morhan Khattaran, Tanda, Shaiya, Mirpur and adjoining areas, while no village in his constituency remained deprived of basic facilities such as electricity.

Sheikh Aftab said the goal was to ensure that Hassanabdal matches other developed towns of the province in terms of infrastructure, basic services and quality of life, adding that balanced and inclusive development would remain the hallmark of his political agenda.

Former MPA Sardar Iftikhar Ahmed Khan, PP-2 General Secretary Abid Shahzad Malik, district vice president Mir Naveed and other PML-N leaders also addressed the gathering, praising Sheikh Aftab's development-focused approach and his close association with the people of the area.

A CDA team waters newly-planted pine trees in Shakarparian area in Islamabad where a large number of trees had recently been cut down. According to the CDA, only paper mulberry trees were removed while citizens were of the opinion that trees from other species had also been chopped down. Currently the civic body is carrying out tree plantation in the area. — Photo by Mohammad Asim

Islamabad, AJK, GB residents to get back health insurance from 16th

Rs40bn approved for the programme now extended till end of June next year

By Ikram Junaidi

ISLAMABAD: The federal government has finally decided to resume the health card facility for over 10 million residents of Islamabad, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Gilgit Baltistan.

The PC-1 worth of Rs40 billion has been approved by the National Steering Committee of Sehat Sahulat Programme (SSP) chaired by Federal Health Minister Syed Mustafa Kamal. The service will be resumed from Jan 16.

The meeting of the committee was attended by health secretary Hamid Yaqoob, special secretary of health and CEO of SSP Arshad Khan, along with members of the National Steering Committee.

The committee reviewed progress on the restoration and launch of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) services to all permanent resident families of ICT, AJK, and Gilgit-Baltistan.

The CEO of Federal SSP Arshad Khan shared prime minister's directives for immediate restoration of the services.

"The committee approved the revised PC-I with an estimated cost of approximately Rs40 billion, extending up to 30th June 2027, to provide free hospitalisation services to all permanent resident families of ICT, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan under the UHC model of Federal Sehat Sahulat Programme.

"It was also decided to extend existing contracts with State Life Insurance Corporation and Nadra through addenda to ensure uninterrupted services, while outstanding liabilities will be cleared from the PSDP as per the prime minister's directions," a statement issued by the health ministry claimed.

Speaking on the occasion, Syed Mustafa Kamal said the country must adopt modern health insurance and strategic purchasing models rather than directly managing hospital services to ensure quality, efficiency, and dignity in healthcare delivery.

The minister confirmed that the prime minister will launch the restored services on Jan 16.

Over 10 million residents of Islamabad, AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan were (GB) suffering since March 2024 as the service was suspended because the federal govt had failed to clear its dues. On the other hand, residents of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Punjab were enjoying the facility. Residents of KP have been getting the best possible medical facility as they can get medical treatment at private and public sector hospitals whereas residents of Punjab can only get treatment at public sector hospitals.

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif had launched the health card programme on Dec 31, 2015, for Islamabad and described the move a first step towards making the country a welfare state. He had also announced the card would be expanded to all parts of Punjab, Balochistan, AJK, Gilgit-Baltistan and then Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata). People of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) could not benefit from the initiative at that time because their governments had declined to become part of the federal government's programme in which they also had to contribute. Later, the KP had launched its own health card namely Sehat Insaf Card.

During the tenure of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government, the programme was expanded across the country.

In April 2022 some of the hospitals had suspended the service as they feared that the PML-N government might discontinue the programme as PTI promoted/marketed the programme as its initiative.

Later, the PML-N government limited the programme to public sector hospitals in Punjab and the service was completely suspended in Islamabad, AJK and GB.

Health card, which is also called Qaumi Sehat Card/Sehat Sahulat Programme, offers open heart surgeries, insertion of stents, management of cancer, neurosurgical procedures, burn management, accident management, dialysis, intensive care management, deliveries, C-section and other medical/surgical procedures up to the limit of Rs1 million per family, per year. There is a facility of inter provincial/inter district portability for availing free-of-cost services from over 1,000 public sector and private empanelled hospitals in the country.

Since the start of health card in year 2015, the State Life Insurance Corporation of Pakistan has been dealing with the card facility, and in 2021 it again won the contract of insurance of health cards for the next three years (2022 to 2025). The insurance has been further extended to June 30, 2027.

New ordinance set to further delay LG polls in Islamabad

Amendments to LG Act replaces MCI with three town corporations, gives administrator more powers and indefinite tenure

By Kashif Abbasi

ISLAMABAD: The local government elections in Islamabad are once again set to be postponed as President Asif Ali Zardari has approved an ordinance which introduces several amendments to the Local Government Act 2015.

Besides replacing the Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad (MCI) with three town corporations, the ordinance gives the government-appointed administrator more powers and an indefinite tenure.

The new ordinance was introduced at a time when the local governments in Islamabad were scheduled to be held on February 15. Thousands of people from all 125 Union Councils had already submitted nomination papers for the elections. However, sources said, chances are now slim that the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) will assert holding the elections as scheduled.

Meanwhile, the ordinance also stated that in the absence of local government, the administrator can hold office until the new local government elections are held - replacing the bar that the administrator's tenure shall not exceed six months.

The ordinance also empowered the administrator to levy tax, fee, rate, rent, toll charge or surcharge.

The federal cabinet recently approved 14 amendments to the Act, including a change in the name of the Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad, replacing it with town corporations.

According to the ordinance, there will be three town corporations in Islamabad and each town corporation will comprise, as far as practicable, the territorial limits of a National Assembly (NA) constituency within the capital. Islamabad has three NA seats.

It is relevant to note here that when the election schedule was announced by the ECP, the local chapter of the PTI had claimed that the government fearing defeat would opt for an escape route and would not conduct the elections in February.

However, PML-N former deputy mayor Syed Zeeshan Ali Naqvi had rejected the claim of the PTI, stating that the ordinance was brought for a better local government system in Islamabad.

"It is habit of PTI to make false claim. We will defeat them in local government elections whenever held as we did in 2015-16. Actually, through this ordinance, we want to have three separate town corporations and three mayors for better service delivery," he said and added that his party wanted a vibrant local government system in Islamabad.

"You know the previous election was held on the basis of weak local government Act that was why the local government representatives could not live up to the expectations of the their constituents. Local government representatives in their tenure remained busy in removing bureaucratic hurdles," he said. "Now, when elections will be held people of Islamabad will have an effective local government setup," he said.

Whenever elections are held, according to the new ordinance, each town corporation will have a mayor and two deputy mayors, four women, one peasant/worker, one trader/ businessman, one youth member and one non-Muslim member.

The term of the last local government expired in February 2021, and since then elections have been delayed under various pretexts. As a result, around 2.5 million residents of Islamabad continue to face issues ranging from water shortages to unpaved streets etc.

Earlier, the ECP conducted delimitations of constituencies multiple times and issued election schedules on several occasions, only to be cancelled later.

A few years ago, the elections were even cancelled a day before polling.

It is pertinent to note that when the local government's term ended in 2021, the PTI was in power and elections were supposed to be held within 120 days. However, the PTI government did not take serious steps to conduct the polls. When the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) came into power, it too delayed the elections.

During the PDM's tenure, elections were set to be held in 50 union councils (UCs), but the government argued that the number should be increased to 101 UCs, leading to further delays.

Later, when arrangements were finalised to hold elections in 101 UCs, the PDM government proposed increasing the number of UCs from 101 to 125. Elections were then scheduled for 125 UCs, but in September last year the government decided to increase the number of general seats in the UCs.

Last month, the ECP decided to hold elections for 125 UCs, but the government has now introduced fresh amendments to the local government law.

PTI links political instability in AJK to 'disregard for public mandate'

By Tariq Naqash

MUZAFFARABAD: Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) on Monday attributed prolonged political instability in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) to "conspiratorial politics, ideologically hollow governments and systematic disregard for the public mandate."

He claimed that its elected government had been ousted through internal and external machinations.

"After assuming power in 2021, the PTI introduced welfare-oriented initiatives and structured planning and development programmes in line with the vision of the party's founder, Imran Khan, but those efforts were deliberately derailed," said PTI AJK's information secretary, Syed Azhar Gillani, at a press conference here, adding that since the removal of the PTI government in April 2023, the territory had failed to achieve political stability.

Mr Gillani, flanked by fellow party leaders Mir Attiqur Rehman and Khawaja Shafique, maintained that attempts were made to weaken his party by engineering defections of more than 25 elected PTI lawmakers.

"However, our party managed to reorganise itself and, within three years, re-emerged as a strong, organised and politically active force in AJK," he claimed.

Paying tribute to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Sohail Afridi, Mr Gillani described him as a loyal and committed worker of Imran Khan.

Despite "discriminatory treatment by the Punjab government," Mr Afridi's Karachi rally reflected continued public support for Imran Khan's ideology, he said, adding that political parties which had ruled the country for two decades had failed to mobilise comparable public gatherings even with advance notice.

Drawing a comparison between PTI's tenure and the current federal government, he claimed that Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves had increased from $14 billion to $30 billion under Imran Khan, while exports had risen from $21 billion to $41 billion. In contrast, he alleged, the incumbent rulers had burdened the country with nearly $100 billion in additional debt within a few years.

He said the PTI was ready for an open debate with the present government on governance performance, comparing it with Imran Khan's three-year tenure. He also claimed that no drone strikes took place during Imran Khan's government, whereas previous governments had witnessed hundreds of such attacks, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians.

Commenting on AJK's political landscape, Mr Gillani described the PML-N and PPP as "interest-driven groups devoid of ideology," alleging that they functioned as franchises serving powerful patrons and frequently altered their political positions to remain in power. He said that although voters had endorsed ideology in the last elections, their mandate was later violated.

Looking ahead to the next polls, he said the PTI would neither rely on "electables" nor engage in political horse-trading. Instead, ideologically committed party workers would be fielded. Acknowledging past political missteps, he said the party intended to nominate only principled, credible and people-centric candidates.

Responding to a question, Mr Gillani said the Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC) had raised genuine public issues and was advocating people's rights, which was why the PTI fully supported the committee's stance.

He added that Imran Khan, despite being incarcerated, had directed party workers to continue advocating for public rights.

He said the PTI would focus on raising political awareness among the youth, exposing hypocrisy in politics and placing direct questions before the public regarding the past four years' performance in health, education, employment and opportunities for women and youth.

In response to another question, he said the PTI would contest the upcoming elections "with full force" and expressed confidence that the people of AJK would once again repose their trust in Imran Khan's political ideology.